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ABSTRACT

All textbooks, regardless of their orientation or vocabulary, are equally unhelpful in the processes of teaching and learning writing. For the most part the textbooks seem to blend two sets of functions within the discipline of rhetoric as it is manifested in writing pedagogy. Whether it goes by the label "current-traditional" or "process-oriented," a pedagogy that confuses the taxonomic/managerial functions of rhetoric with its heuristic/epistemic functions will always focus on the analytical to the neglect of the synthetic, the product over the process. Assignments and standards should, therefore, grow out of the experiences of having-written and having-to-write, and not be appropriated as a set of abstractions found in textbooks. In addition, the classrooms should become workshops wherein apprentice writers and experienced instructors share the experience of writing, not the ordeal of reading about it and analyzing the finished products of others. Textbooks must not be replaced, but dislodged, not improved, but abandoned. No textbook should take the place of the teacher--a live and willing alchemist willing to bestow his or her own magic upon the apprentice writers. (HOD)

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DECONSTRUCTING COMPOSITION TEXTBOOKS

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"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master--that's all."

Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass

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Most of us have a love/hate affair with the composition textbook. While it serves as a security blanket for students (and Freshman Writing Committees) who cannot conceive of a writing course without a text of some kind and as a scapegoat for those administrators looking to fix the blame for student complaints and dull writing, it is also an enormously frustrating and delibitating instrument at the same time. Many of us would frankly confess that we still don't know how to use a textbook successfully or how the textbook is supposed to work, though all of us would suspect that we know how to write a better one. I agree with the two other panelists (John/Sue) that textbooks do tell us a lot about our profession, but I disagree perhaps about what it does tell us.

What I wish to do in this paper is convince you of

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something you already know, viz., that textbooks cannot by their very nature do what we want them to do: teach writing. By this I mean not only that textbooks alone do not teach--which is tautological--but that they are incapable of even assisting very much in the process of learning to write. What I want to advocate is not better textbook writing, or more resourceful use of textbooks in the classroom, but their abandonment altogether. The kind of textbook which I am excoriating here is not only the despised current-traditional text which emphasizes models and drills and grammatical knowledge for its own sake, but also the newly fashionable process-oriented textbooks which talk of heuristics and recursiveness and revising as reseeing. All textbooks, regardless of their parentage or vocabulary, are equally unhelpful in the processes of teaching and learning writing. (As I am sure some of you may have surmised, it may be the case that our profession has simply traded one set of shibboleths for another--that no revolution in teaching technique is occurring. If such is the case, we are only faithfully following Kuhn who tells us that paradigm shifts are a matter not of "breakthroughs" but "talkthroughs"--a rhetorical process, not an empirical one.) As the analyses which have preceded my paper have ebulliently documented, most textbooks are written for other teachers and for publishers--not for students of writing. The organization, the emphasis, the content of our textbooks prove that our assumed audience is our peers and examiners, not our students.

In my epigraph from Through the Looking-glass, we have little trouble recognizing Lewis Carroll's sneer at the verbal treacheries committed by all manner of authoritarian figures. What we sometimes fail to recognize however is how often we play the Humpty Dumpty role to our befuddled students' Alice in our composition classrooms: the Master of Words, the Keeper of the Keys, the Powerbroker of language itself. Words mean what we tell students they mean--as our lectures, our conferences, and our grading marginalia abundantly demonstrate. Listen to yourself talk when you're discussing writing with your students. What does "awkward structure" mean? What does "needs more transitional elements here" mean? What does "commas must be supplied after a nonrestricted modifier" mean? Such phrasings mean one thing to students: "I know how to do this and you don't," that is, "there's glory for you!" And does anyone you know actually use heuristic procedures in their composing process? When was the last time you analyzed your audience before you committed pen or cursor to paper? Whence comes these strange ways of talking about writing? From textbooks. Academic writing, as Mina Shaughnessy has pointed out, is for many students "a trap, not a way of communicating something to someone." And I would like to add: Textbooks are a trap, not a way of teaching something to someone.

No paradigm revolutions are going to occur through the use of more process- oriented textbooks. And they will not

occur precisely because the textbook itself is an outmoded means of accessing the peculiar nature of the writing process; if the truth were known, the textbook was stillborn from the beginning. Contemporary composition pedagogy owes its greatest debt not to the "vitalism" which Richard Young indicted in his "Paradigms and Problems" essay so often quoted, but to the New Criticism, the technique of close reading which until recently dominated the teaching of literature in Anglo-American universities. New Criticism taught us that the book, the text was all, that with analytical, perspicacious reading we could unlock all the secrets of the text without consulting the author's intentions or worrying over its effects on the reader. Like Jacob, we wrestle with a recalcitrant angel, the text, demanding that it yield its blessing before we loosen our grip. The New Criticism implicitly fostered a writing pedagogy which paralleled its method of reading, encouraging attention to the product, and detachment from the process itself. The New Criticism taught that writing pedagogy should not mean but be, that writing could be taught with books, divorced from the doing of writing. Hence our compulsion to adopt rhetorics and readers for the classroom.

But the book as a technology is not the same as writing, for writing is itself both process and product, the book a product only bearing thin traces of the process. Books themselves, as objects of inquiry, compel us as teachers and our students as learners to reduce the reception of an art,

skill or craft, to the mechanical manipulation of certain abstractions. Textbooks in writing, whatever their claims, whatever their vocabularies, lie about what it means to write, and what it means to learn to write. Textbooks, by their very nature lie, and lie they do in the same way that photographs, video, and audio all lie: they purport to be the thing itself when they are but faint echoes, dim reflections of it. They purport to be the way into an experience when instead they are the way out of it. Textbooks tend to abstract students from the activity of writing and distract students with artificial and counter-intuitive notions about the craft of writing. Every moment spent in analysis or exercise is a moment lost to writing.

Textbooks must be, therefore, <u>deconstructed</u>. I will not be foolish enough to offer a definition of that term; as J. Hillis Miller suggests, "Sentences of the form, 'deconstruction is so and so' are a contradiction in terms. . . . Deconstruction, like any method of interpretation, can only be exemplified." My colleagues on this panel have performed and exemplified their own kinds of deconstruction today, sniffing out what they believe are the underlying fictions (call them metaphors, assumptions, or conventions if you like) of our textbooks and our methods of teaching. But I think we must go farther. We need not only the deconstruction of particular textbooks but of the textbook itself as a means for teaching writing.

If we are Humpty Dumptys it is only because that is what our profession has compelled us to be. If we have no way of proving to ourselves or our students that they actually write better when they leave our programs, then it becomes somewhat important that we try to create the appropriate fictions which suggest they have improved. If we can talk of increasing syntactic maturity by a number of T-units, or can point out greater density of cohesive ties over certain discourse units, at least, there's glory for you. The appearance is more powerful than the presence. I suspect that many of the publications in RTE, CCCC, and CE belong to a genre of report that basically says "We've found a new way to corroborate the <u>appearance</u> that writing growth may be occurring." Here we are dealing with high-calibre fictions, folk-tales, psych-jobs of the most ingenious sort, always cleverly conceived, often entertaining, altogether necessary, but unforgivably and completely spurious.

I am not the least bit cynical about this. But I do admit to being a bit impish about it. For unlike some of my colleagues, I do not disdain the labels alchemist or alchemy when they are applied to my teaching and to the activity of writing. That seems to me, in our digitized age, just the right image for a teacher of writing. It is an image, not of Humpty Dumpty, arbitrarily using language to further his nefarious goals, but that of a Master Sorceror, a Mysterious Worldmaker who takes in apprentices to learn by watching and

doing, watching and doing, not merely by reading and theorizing. The alchemist knows his apprentice knows her stuff when she can cast a spell, turning iron into gold, not when she can diagram the correct incantation. When I think of such an alchemist I imagine someone like Donald Murray at UNH or John Warnock at Wyoming. Both of them place the process at the center of the classroom not because it is the politically trendy thing to do, but because writing is process or it is nothing; they believe, as I do, that writing is wonder, and magic and discovery, or it is self-serving trifle.

Alchemical classrooms are "workshops"; its students are apprentices; the instructor is a wily sorceror who shows the apprentices how to learn the craft by doing it in front of them, not by assigning readings about it. In a truly process-oriented class the textbook is not the one adopted by a committee and available at the bookstore but one which emerges in the interaction between apprentice and master, apprentice and apprentice. The exchange of power that occurs, the mastery of language, is not orchestrated, not arbitrary, and not artificial. Assignments and standards grow out of the experience of having-written and having-to-write, and not by having appropriated a set of abstractions.

By what entrance then does the grand rhetorical tradition come into the classroom? It comes in person,

it manifests itself through the activity of the Sorceror or Sorceress as he or she shares experience, knowledge, facility with language. The problem is an old one; a diagram might help:

Rhetoric as taxonomic and managerial

I. Provides classificatory, categorizing tools, "slots" for identifying and distinguishing the features of oral and written discourse

II. Manifested in such paraphernalia as
-- "aims" and "modes"
-- "tropes" and "metaphors"
-- analyses of audience
-- analyses of authorial stance

III. Rhetoric as taxonomy or manager enshrines the already-made product and as such is a static phenomenon, tangentially concerned with the production of texts.

Rhetoric as heuristic and epistemic

I. Serves as a dynamic process which creates and shapes discourse, makes the speaker/writer's world manifest and accessible to an audience

II. Manifested in such paraphernalia as
-- discovery strategies (tagmemic, Burkean, Topoi)
-- "free-writing" and "brainstorming"
-- reader-response and deconstructive strategies

III. Rhetoric as heuristic procedure or epistemic creator focuses on the embryonic non-text and as such is a dynamic phenomenon concerned with the production and processing of discourse from beginning to end.

Most textbooks I have reviewed seem to conflate two distinct sets of functions within the discipline of rhetoric as it is manifested in writing pedagogy. Whether it goes by the label "current-traditional" or "process-oriented," a pedagogy which confuses the taxonomic/managerial functions of rhetoric with the heuristic/epistemic functions will always focus on the <u>analytical</u> to the neglect of the <u>synthetic</u>, the product over the process. But how then are students to learn and use the information which rhetorical taxonomy contains? Not by reading about them (which is a thoroughgoing New Critical approach--sterile, dislocative, abstracted from the expression of self), but by observing the Sorceror at work, by comparing one's spells with others', by attuning one's self to her inner speech.

If we are serious as a profession about writing as a process we will use our classrooms responsibly as workshops wherein apprentice writers and experienced instructors share the experience of writing, not the ordeal of reading about it and analyzing the finished products of others. Our textbooks must not be replaced, but dislodged, not improved, but abandoned. Let the handbooks stay if they must--for "reference" as we say--let them be suggestive and exemplary, not definitive--but let them be handbooks, books that are consulted if need be. But let no textbook take the place of a live and willing alchemist willing to bestow his or her own magic upon the apprentices.